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INFO RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0915
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0323
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0368
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1919
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 2782
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 4664
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KARACHI 000397

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: MUHARRAM VIOLENCE IN KARACHI

Classified by: Acting Consul General Mary Elizabeth Madden, Reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Three days of Muharram procession violence in Karachi culminated on December 28 with a suicide bombing that killed at least 43 people and sparked rioting leading to extensive property damage. Political leaders urged calm, but tensions remain high throughout the city. End summary.

Three Blasts in Three Days

¶2. (SBU) In the past, Karachi was known for sectarian violence, especially during Muharram. However, the last few years were calm and peaceful. On December 27, an IED planted next to a parked car wounded 19 people in a Muharram procession in the area of Paposh Nagar. The next day, there was an explosion during a procession in Orangi. Thirty-four people were wounded. The police are uncertain as to whether the explosion was caused by an IED or gas in a sewage line. Following the explosion, the crowd set fire to three vehicles.

¶3. (C) During the main Ashura procession on December 28, a suicide bomber made it into the security zone and detonated near the front of the procession on M.A. Jinnah Road. The death toll currently stands at 43 with approximately 75 injured. Among the dead are two Rangers (paramilitary police). According to local contacts, the suspect approached the procession at a rest area set up along the route. As he attempted to join the procession, he was challenged by a Ranger and a private security "scout" associated with the event. While being checked, he detonated his device, approximately 16 kg of high explosives packed with ball bearings and nails. After the explosion, rioting began and shops and vehicles were set on fire. Twelve hours later buildings were still on fire as firemen suffered difficulty in reaching the locations. Due to a shortage of fire brigades, reinforcements were summoned from Hyderabad (approximately 2 hours from Karachi), and did not arrive until the following morning.

Urge for Peace

¶4. (SBU) Immediately following initial reports of the explosion, leaders from Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) took the airwaves and urged calm. Syed Mustafa Kamal, mayor of Karachi, called for people to "not take law and order into their own hands" and declared this an "attack on all people of Karachi."

Economic Impact

¶5. (SBU) Estimates vary, but approximately 1,500-3,000 shops were destroyed. (Note: One building may contain several hundred small shops. End note.) The shops and markets on M.A. Jinnah Road are

predominately wholesale businesses, including the second-hand clothes market mainly owned by Pashtuns. Property damage estimates are in the tens of millions of dollars. Destroyed wholesale inventory includes plastic goods, food and beverage, cosmetics, cell phones, perfumes, paints and chemicals. The fires reduced several buildings to ashes. Over 60 vehicles, including two police mobiles and several ambulances, were damaged or destroyed.

¶16. (U) The Chief Minister declared a provincial day of mourning for December 29. All transportation, including buses and rickshaws, stayed off the roads. The majority of shops and businesses were closed, although banks stayed open. The holiday and business closures were observed in cities throughout the province. The Karachi Stock Exchange saw anemic trading, and closed 75 minutes early due to safety concerns.

Conspiracy Theories Abound

¶17. (C) Before the declaration of a holiday, Shahi Syed, President of Awami National Party (ANP) appealed to Pathans to keep transport off the roads. He said Pathans usually suffer when buses are burnt by angry mobs. He said that "some elements" are taking advantage of the situation to target Pashtun owned businesses. (Note: Syed is referring to Mohajirs. There is a history of ethnic violence between Mohajirs and Pashtuns in Karachi. End note.)

¶18. (C) Faisal Sabzwari, Sindh Minister for Youth and head of MQM Media Cell, said the incident was expected. He stated his party tried to warn colleagues in the government, but they did not heed the warning. He said MQM is trying to placate Shias and asking for their cooperation in maintaining peace, but he expected trouble during the

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funeral processions on December 29.

¶19. (C) Rehman Malik, Federal Minister of Interior, called the incident a "calculated conspiracy" noting that the fires began within minutes of the explosion, and spread quickly. (Note: This tracks with rumors heard in Karachi. End note.) Malik called for unity and said "anybody trying to destabilize Karachi is actually destabilizing Pakistan."

Comment

¶10. (C) Karachi was spared the violence of other Pakistani cities the past months. Given its violent history, this left many residents uneasy. The December 28 attack shattered the peace. While Karachi is still in mourning, the finger pointing is already beginning. The next few days and weeks will tell if all factions will pull together for peace, or if this will be the incident that leads to the latest round of ethnic violence in Karachi.

MADDEN